



love reclaimed

LOVE AND LOSS BETWEEN AN EMPEROR
AND HIS WIFE INSPIRE ST JOHN VILLA

“POOR CARLOTA!”

These two words, which escaped the lips of Mexico's Maximilian I moments before his 1867 death by firing squad, offer a glimpse at the depth of love shared by the Mexican emperor and his wife, Carlota of Mexico. That love spoke to Craig and Maria Arnold more than 100 years later when, on their European honeymoon, they came across Miramare, a castle on Italy's coast that was built for the empress consort and her husband in the mid-19th century.

The villa overlooks the sea, just like Miramare, and Carlota herself welcomes visitors to the Arnolds' five-bedroom villa in St John's tony Upper Peter Bay neighborhood. The emperor's wife's visage graces the home's ceramic name plaque, a single tear trailing down her cheek to commemorate the love and loss she felt for her dear Maximilian.



CARLOTA'S WIDE VERANDA AND UNIQUE T-SHAPED INFINITY-EDGE POOL SPAN THE WIDTH OF THE HOME'S NORTHERN END, OFFERING AMPLE SPACE FROM WHICH TO TAKE IN THE STUNNING NORTH SHORE, WHERE THE COLOURS RUN THE GAMUT FROM THE LUSH GREEN OF THE NATIONAL PARK TO THE BRILLIANT WHITE OF CINNAMON BAY'S POWDERY SANDS BELOW, TO THE SPARKLING TURQUOISE OF NEAR-SHORE WATERS AND THE RICH BLUES OF THE DEEPER OCEAN BEYOND



"It struck us as a romantic story, a story of love, and we wanted it to be a part of our house," says Craig. "That's why we called it Villa Carlota."

St John has been a part of the Arnolds' story since the early 1970s, when they first came for an escape at what was then the only full-scale resort on the island, Caneel Bay. Not a whole lot has changed on this island since the Arnolds' love affair with the smallest of the three US Virgins began, thanks in large part to the designation of nearly two-thirds of the island as National Park. Life is sweet and slow-paced on this three-by-nine-mile piece of paradise, where visitors flock to enjoy challenging hiking trails with beautiful vistas and pristine beaches that are strikingly devoid of development.

Not long after the Arnolds discovered St John, development began on the exclusive Peter Bay neighbourhood, located on the island's dazzling north shore and framed by raw, unspoiled National Park land. Craig got his feet wet in the sometimes challenging world of island development by building a "spec home" in Upper Peter Bay before taking on the task of creating an island home for himself and his family in the early 2000s.

"After building the spec home, I felt like I at least had the courage to create a dream house," says Craig. "Villa Carlota is a very personal statement of us."

Virginia-based architect Michael Oxman, who's designed numerous houses on St John, tackled the challenge of building on the precariously steep and narrow 0.6-acre Upper Peter Bay lot. Oxman worked within the constraints of the site while incorporating the Arnolds' vision to create a place where the couple and their two grown children could call home.

Carlota's wide veranda and unique T-shaped infinity-edge pool span the width of the home's northern end, offering ample space from which to take in the stunning north shore, where the colours run the gamut from the lush green of the National Park to the brilliant white of Cinnamon Bay's powdery sands below, to the sparkling turquoise of near-shore waters and the rich blues of the deeper ocean beyond. An assortment of chaises longues, comfortable chairs, and even a large hammock make it difficult to tear oneself away from the natural beauty that spreads out before Carlota.



LEFT V
TOP C
ABOVE C

“The views from that elevation are spectacular,” says architect Michael Oxman. “The goal was to be able to experience those views from every room of the home. Even though we had a compact site, we were able to place the guest bedrooms on one side of the site and the main house and master bedroom on the other.”

The outdoor spaces that were so important to the Arnolds were equally as difficult to conceive owing to the site’s steep grade. Oxman was able to incorporate the large, sweeping veranda that overlooks the breathtaking north shore views without using substantial amounts of concrete, saving both time and money during the home’s construction.

“To keep the support walls as short as possible, the veranda was cantilevered a massive 14 feet,” says Oxman.

Pergolas partially shade the upper-level bedroom’s private verandas, while steps off one of the guest bedroom’s verandas lead straight into the pool—an idea put forth during the design phase by Craig himself. The architect maintained the guest bedroom veranda’s privacy by raising the bedroom up, reducing

visibility of the veranda from the very pool into which it leads.

The home’s combination of stonework, rich woods, and plaster finishes make Carlota an ideal example of St John vernacular architecture. The exterior plaster, with just the slightest hint of pink, and the veranda’s columns, washed in ethereal pastels, play off the brilliant blues of the ocean below. The medley of colours, evocative of a candy shop confection, is tempered by the deep mahogany doors and windows that lead to Carlota’s interior spaces.

“All of our doors and windows were fabricated in a little village in Costa Rica,” says Craig. “I flew down there three or four times to visit with the families that were working on them. I put a lot of myself into the home, and to meet the people who were hand crafting our doors and windows was the coolest thing. I’m so proud of my doors and windows.”

The Arnolds put a lot of themselves into the home’s interior as well. Craig and Maria have travelled all over the world, and vestiges of the locales they’ve visited can be found throughout Carlota. Craig describes the decor as “British Colonial with an Indonesian twist.”



FAR LEFT V
LEFT C
ABOVE C



An Italian tin table on the veranda just outside the home's kitchen hosts candlelit family dinners. Antique Chinese works of art adorn the indoor dining room, including a Chinese scroll that was gifted to the Arnolds by one of their oldest and dearest friends. Late 18th/early 19th century stamps from the British Raj Postal Service hang on the living room wall as a nod to the time Craig spent in Delhi on business. Works of art from Burma that are displayed in one of Carlota's four guest bedrooms were purchased by Craig and Maria who were among the first Americans allowed into the country when it opened its borders to tourism in the early 1990s.

As remarkable as these pieces and their stories are, the hands-down showstopper is the villa's dining room table.

"In the dining room we have a solid mahogany table from Java," says Craig. "It used to be an 18th-century temple door. I saw it on one of our trips to the Far East and I said, 'That's it; that's going to be our dining room table.' It's a hallmark."

The Arnolds' love of St John is represented by the home's distinct ceramic light fixtures, which were made by local artist Catherine Perry. Luxurious touches like Vera Wang mattresses in each of the bedrooms, Italian marble and hand-crafted cabinetry in the en suite bathrooms, and Brazilian granite kitchen countertops secure Carlota's place among the finest vacation villas on St John. But to Craig and Maria, it's the personal touches, the pieces of decor that represent their memories and their life as a couple, that make their island home so special.

"It's kind of an eclectic collection of personal items," says Craig. "It is very much a personal statement. The decor has nothing to do with contrivances; it's really about the time we've spent running around the world. It's a special place for us and we love it. To us, St John is home." M

ABOVE V
LEFT C
RIGHT TOP C
RIGHT BELOW C



IF YOU GO

- 1 There is no airport on St John, so to get here, you'll fly into the Cyril E. King Airport on nearby St Thomas, which is serviced by several major airlines including American, Delta, JetBlue, United, and US Airways. Direct flights arrive from a handful of major cities including New York-JFK, Chicago-O'Hare, Atlanta, and Washington-Dulles. Once you arrive on St Thomas, you'll take a 30-minute taxi ride to Red Hook, where you'll catch a ferry to Cruz Bay, St John. The ferry ride is approximately 20 minutes.
- 2 A rental car is recommended, and there are plenty of rental car companies on St John. There are also many open-air taxis called "safaris," and hitchhiking is a very common, safe, and accepted mode of transportation here.
- 3 Bring decent hiking shoes, a swimsuit, snorkel gear, and a good book.
- 4 Getting out on the water is a must when you're on St John. The nearby British Virgin Islands beg to be explored. Create your own itinerary with smaller private boats, like Palm Tree Charters (www.palmtreecharters.com), or spread out and relax on beautiful, handmade Kekoa (www.blacksailsvi.com).
- 5 If a trip to the BVI is on your itinerary—and it should be! —don't forget to bring your passport.

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